

ASK Magazine

By practitioners for practitioners

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FEATURES



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry Little is currently the head of the Air Force's Center for Acquisition Excellence. Before that he was the Program Director for the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM). He is one of DoD's most seasoned program managers. He entered the Air Force in 1967 and served on active duty until 1975. In 1997 he was promoted to the grade of SES.

Willpower

by Terry Little

I am struck by how often failure is blamed on a lack of discipline. You often hear losing coaches cite this as the reason for a big loss. I don't recall the last time I heard one say that his team lost a game because of his players' lack of skill. I think a breakdown in discipline is also one of the key reasons why program and project management teams fail to meet expectations.

The first program I ever managed had a clear set of priorities. I understood the mandate, and so did everyone else on the team. We set an ambitious schedule and started to work fervently. Not too long into the program the customer wanted to know what performance he was going to get. I replied by categorizing the performance parameters into three bins:

1. Performance you will get.
2. Performance you may get.
3. Performance that there's no way you will get.

Did that cause an uproar. The customer demanded everything in the second bin be moved to the first, and most everything in the third bin be moved to the second. My immediate impulse was to agree, but I managed to overcome that. In my heart, I knew that we would never meet the already ambitious schedule if we had to deliver more performance. "No" was my answer.

"If you don't give me better performance, then I am going to get the program cancelled," the customer argued. Fine. He attempted to carry through on his threat, but senior management, to their credit, came down on my side.

The program turned out to be a huge success, but the result would have been largely different had senior management or I failed to maintain discipline. Since then I can't tell you how many times saying "no" has kept the programs I've managed on track.

Program and project managers have to be vigilant about maintaining discipline. So many temptations exist. Development programs are a really good example of how this occurs. When using a cost reimbursable approach to pay for them, we can be sorely tempted to plan as we go, excusing ourselves because of the risk involved, or because we did not think we had enough time to plan adequately. Government is particularly susceptible to this kind of behavior. Watch out!

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FEATURES: TERRY LITTLE

Willpower (cont'd)

Requirements grow. Work scope grows. Cost and schedule grow.

Commercial companies only rarely use a cost reimbursement approach when investing in risky projects. Rather, they do fixed-price, incremental investing, and put a high premium on detailed planning. They place a fixed amount of money into a research or development project with the expectation (but not a guarantee) of a certain result. Periodically, or when the money is gone, they look at interim results (compared to plan) and decide whether to invest more funds. This makes for a very disciplined approach that program and project managers in government can learn from.



A performance test firing of a U.S. Air Force Expendable Launch Vehicle project. Not the same kind of performance Terry Little is talking about in his article, but there is probably just as much bang for the buck in his suggestions about how to maintain project discipline.

“The program turned out to be a huge success, but the result would have been largely different had senior management or I failed to maintain discipline.”

Successful program and project managers understand the value of maintaining discipline on a project. Being disciplined is not easy, and requires strong willpower. It pays to always be thinking about key decisions where you've either acted to maintain discipline or allowed a breakdown to occur. The payoff is a better understanding of why discipline is important to your project and what your role is in fostering a disciplined attitude for the entire project team.